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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001025

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PAYS FAREWELL CALL ON CHIEF ADVISOR

REF: A. DHAKA 0951  
[1](#)B. DHAKA 0867  
[1](#)C. DHAKA 0955

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis; Reason 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. SUMMARY: On June 19, the Ambassador paid a farewell call on Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmed. Also present were America and Pacific Wing Director General Shahidul Islam, Personal Secretary to the Chief Advisor Kazi Aminul Islam, Deputy

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Press Secretary Helaluddin and Deputy Chief of Mission (notetaker). The Chief Advisor affirmed Bangladesh's commitment to hold elections by 2008 and the GOB commitment to human rights and the rule of law. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) BILATERAL ISSUES: As it moves towards elections, the Ambassador said the U.S. supports the Government of Bangladesh, and it remains a key partner on issues from avian influenza to counterterrorism. The Chief Advisor thanked the Ambassador for her support during an historical period in Bangladesh.

[1](#)3. (C) POLITICAL SITUATION: The Chief Advisor confirmed his government's commitment to elections in 2008 and emphasized a commitment to full transparency. He said the voter registration pilot program appeared initially successful and was especially pleased by the enthusiasm expressed by Bangladeshi women. Initial concerns that women would resist being photographed were unfounded, because Imams told women that if it was acceptable for them to be photographed for Haj visas, it was okay for voter registrations. He acknowledged that a challenge for the Electoral Commission would be ensuring full registration in urban areas as many residents work all day. To address this concern, the Electoral Commission has promised to keep registration centers open in the evenings to facilitate the registration of working people. He underscored the importance of the voter list for Bangladesh's political landscape, as it provides a mechanism for future elections.

[1](#)4. (C) Ahmed sees a need to strengthen local government both to increase accountability at the local level and to provide a financial base from which local governments can operate. The Ambassador noted that USAID is actively engaged in working with local government. The Chief Advisor sees a relevant model in town councils developed in colonial India and still in place today in both Pakistan and India. In addition to strengthening local governance, this provided experience to politicians before they accessed the national stage. The Chief Advisor considers this a critical element of political reform. He expects a officially sanctioned

governance study, due in September, to reflect this need.

15. (C) The Chief Advisor confirmed that the electoral process will go forward as announced and his government will not lose focus to holding elections before the end of 2008. When asked whether the President would remain in office beyond his term which ends in September 2007, the Chief Advisor demurred. Ahmed said the Caretaker government is reluctant to increase the number of advisors as this may raise constitutional issues. To address the burgeoning work load of the Advisors, he said the government is looking at ways to create more capacity within the existing bureaucracy, namely by delegating authority to more junior bureaucrats.

16. (C) HUMAN RIGHTS & ARRESTS: He confided that the judge he appointed to conduct the Choilesh Ritchil death inquiry has asked for more time and that he concurred to ensure the final report will be credible and thorough. (Ref A) The Ambassador confirmed that we are in close touch with the family of arrested Amcit Abdul Awal Mintoo (Ref B), adding that there is congressional interest in the case (Ref C). Ahmed stated that in all legal cases, the government of Bangladesh will act in accordance with the laws of the land and the instructions of the courts. He explained that it is in the government's interest to ensure that due process is respected so that future cases are not jeopardized or simply dismissed by the courts. He confirmed that every legal case, including those concerning Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, will proceed in the same way. Moreover, the special courts hearing these cases fall under the normal appeals process, he said, guaranteeing due process for defendants. As an example of the commitment to transparency, he added they have allowed print media to attend legal proceedings.

17. (C) BAN ON POLITICS: The Ambassador asked the Chief

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Advisor about the ban on politics, stressing that political reform and discussions with the Electoral Commission can not go forward in the current environment. The Chief Advisor assured the Ambassador that the government will lift the ban on politics, but he can not predict when that will be. He claimed, however, that political activity is in practice now allowed and taking place. He cited talk shows and discussions and meetings among political leaders as evidence.

18. (C) Comment: As always, the Chief Advisor was on message and fully prepared to address the issues we raise. He understands how Bangladesh's current situation is viewed from Western capitals and sought to reassure the Ambassador that the caretaker government will confront human rights abuses, ensure a fair trial for those charged with corruption, and will remain on track for elections. He is always credible with interlocutors and certainly has "won" certain arguments with the military, for example lifting the ban on Sheikh Hasina's return to Bangladesh and establishing a separate investigation into the Richil murder. How far he can go, or wants to go, in asserting differences with the military remains opaque.

BUTENIS